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AN EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE TO A FIRST-YEAR HIGH-SCHOOL CLASS

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Those who have undertaken to teach the business letter to a first-year high-school class know how difficult it is to arouse and maintain interest.

“What can I do to provide an incentive to real effort?” I asked myself over and over as I approached this phase of composition work. I finally conceived a plan that, in the working, has proved more than satisfactory.

I personally visited active business men of the city, asking each if he would take the time and trouble to answer a letter of application written by a student. I also requested each to offer any criticisms or make any suggestions which, in his opinion, would enable the student to write a stronger application. I met with ready response and lively interest on the part of everyone approached—not only interest, but often offers of valuable suggestions.

One of the merchants called my attention to a new book on the business letter, prepared for business men by business men, and offered to lend it to me. One brought out files of letters and pointed out new features in up-to-date letters from great business concerns. The students, on being shown the book, were surprised to find that business men consider the business letter of so much importance as to feel the necessity of making a study of it. They had thought that all that was essential was an idea of the subject-matter to be contained in the letter.

Having presented, through the use of good models, the correct forms of the business letter and the principles that determine its contents, I gave each student the name of one of the men I had visited and asked him to write a letter of application for a position with the firm.

My list of names included those of general merchants, dry-goods merchants, implement dealers, automobile dealers and repairers, hardware men, jewelers, grocers, druggists, furniture dealers, confectioners, book and music dealers, real-estate men, lawyers, bankers, manufacturers, clothiers, newspapers editors, dentists, and physicians.

Questions at once arose as to what a high-school student could do in the establishments named; for each must state qualifications for the position to be sought. Such a discussion of vocations followed as would have gladdened my heart had it been the result of a plan for a lesson in oral composition. The direction of the discussion was given by the students, not the teacher.

When all preliminaries had been arranged, the letters were written. Each pupil, on his own initiative, made sure of every minute detail in form, content, fold, and address. It was not necessary to *require* care in preparation; the student took care because he *wanted* to. His questions as to these details revealed to me where my teaching had failed. Indeed, I was discovering as much as were the children. Many things which I had believed sufficiently clear I found had not been clear and definite in the minds of the students. As a final result of the eagerness of the students to make a good impression on the business men addressed, the letters, when finally ready for mailing, would, in many cases, have done credit to graduates of a business course. Then how eagerly the answers were awaited!

Those replies emphasized, by repetition, principles already taught, and gave suggestions, especially as to tone and content—gave the students the viewpoint of the business man. Some of the writers called attention to what would be expected of anyone in the position applied for and suggested preparation that might be made for the work if the student really wished to engage in that pursuit at some later date. In some instances the writers requested interviews, and, when the students called, discussed at some length the points made in their letters. In a few cases the transaction became an actual one, and the student was employed for summer work.

One boy, on receipt of the reply to his application, was so impressed with the criticisms and suggestions made that he asked

permission to write another application to the same firm in accordance with the suggestions. Of course the permission was given; and the second letter was, indeed, an improvement. With it, he inclosed a personal note expressing his appreciation and thanking the merchant for his interest. Here was a lesson in business courtesy that will not soon be forgotten.

When the replies had all been received, I collected them and, for my own future use, tabulated all criticisms and suggestions. I then read the replies in class, asking the students to take notes, and commenting on especially pertinent suggestions. This done, I asked each pupil to write an informal friendly letter to some student or teacher who would be especially interested in the experiment and describe it in detail, mentioning those things which had impressed him most.

These letters were brought to class and read aloud, each student reading a classmate's letter. This provided, in sugar-coated form, the repetition necessary to fix salient features, and gave practice in writing another form of letter.

And the experiment continued to reach out. To give further practice in actual business correspondence I provided each student with the address of some great daily newspaper and asked him to write for a sample copy. These letters, necessarily brief, were written on memo-heads and provided further example of proportion and a different method of folding.

The newspapers thus secured from all parts of the United States we used as a basis for the study of various types of narration, as the news story, characteristics of exposition found in editorials, salient elements of argument illustrated by advertisements and editorials, and general theme and forcefulness shown in cartoons and headlines.

My conclusions as to the value of the whole experiment are as follows:

1. Such teaching fills the teacher with enthusiasm that communicates itself to the students.
2. It serves as a bond between the school and the business world that makes the child feel that while in school he is *living*, not *preparing to live*.

3. It fills with interest an otherwise dry subject. As one student expressed it, "It is so much nicer to write of real things to real people than to write of make-believe things to imaginary people."

4. It makes an actual business transaction, not the teacher or the textbook, the source of information.

5. It gives both teacher and student the viewpoint of the business man.

6. It gives the student an incentive for earnest effort that no ordinary classroom or textbook exercise can give him.

6. It emphasizes the value of little things—something difficult to impress upon the average youth.

7. It robs the English period of tedium and makes it one of the happy hours of the day.

8. It leads to a study of the vocational opportunities offered by the community and forcibly presents the idea of employing the summer months profitably.

9. It gives some students opportunity to secure summer employment.

10. It brings the teacher and student into closer relation and emphasizes to the student the value of such relation by furnishing opportunity for the teacher to render him real service in recommending him for some position sought.

11. In fine, it provides ideal motivation for the work of the English class on a phase of the subject which it is difficult to motivate.